

G L O S S A

Sonship or Adoption as Sons?

In the New Testament the nature of the relationship between the Triune God and the regenerated believers is a matter of great significance. The believers' understanding of this relationship has a great impact on their experience of the realities of God's economy. The principal characterization of this relationship is conveyed in the thought of the believers being sons of God (Rom. 8:14; Gal. 3:26). This is commonly accepted by Christians, but an exact understanding of how the believers are sons of God is not as clearly understood. This lack of clarity derives, in part, from the translation of the word υιοθεσία in the New Testament.

The word υιοθεσία (lit., setting one as a son) occurs five times in the New Testament (Rom. 8:15, 23; 9:4; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5) and has been translated in the majority of English versions as *adoption as sons*. This translation is unfortunate because *adoption* conveys the impression to most English readers that the way one becomes a son of God is through a judicial procedure. An alternate translation, *sonship*, which occurs in a few versions¹, carries the notion in English of one who has the status of a son. The translation of υιοθεσία as *sonship* is preferable since it conveys the sense of the abiding status of being a son, although it does not fully capture the notion that υιοθεσία also involves a process. This article investigates the meaning and use of the word υιοθεσία and alternate ways of understanding how this takes place, whether by a judicial procedure or through a divine, organic process.

The Meaning and Use of the Word υιοθεσία

The word υιοθεσία is a compound with two parts: a noun υίος meaning *son*, and θεσία, derived from the verb τίθημι, meaning *to set, put, or place*. Therefore υιοθεσία literally means *setting someone as a son or putting someone in the place of a son*. Most translators and lexicographers consider the human situation when defining υιοθεσία, and in the human situation, setting or placing someone as a son means adoption; hence, they translate and define the word as "adoption."² In English *sonship* refers to one who has the status of a son. This word is better than "adoption," which as Byrne points out, does not "do justice to the sense of an abiding status" (293). While *sonship* does not fully convey what the Greek word implies, it is closer to

the Greek word and preferable to *adoption*, especially in the light of the revelation of the Bible.

Υιοθεσία was not used much before the writing of the New Testament³, so it appears to be a word that had meaning primarily for the early church. When Romans 8:15, 23; 9:4; Galatians 4:5, and Ephesians 1:5 are viewed together, it is clear that υιοθεσία refers to a process which begins with predestination and ends with the redemption of our body.

A Judicial Procedure

The natural way that children are brought into being is through birth. But once birth has taken place, human beings can only be set as a son or put into the place of a son in a family other than their birth family through the judicial procedure of adoption. When υιοθεσία occurs in literature prior to the New Testament, mostly in inscriptions, it does have the meaning of adoption, because it refers to the judicial procedure of making someone a son who has already been born the son of someone else. Unfortunately, when many people come to the Bible and are confronted with the notion that believers are also sons of God, they consider, according to this judicial procedure, that this also must take place through adoption.

Although υιοθεσία was not used by Greek translators of the Old Testament, the concept of human beings being sons of God is present in the Old Testament. The people of Israel are considered sons of God on a few occasions (Exo. 4:22; Deut. 14:1; 32:19; Isa. 63:16). In addition, eschatologically or prophetically the people of Israel are also called the sons of the living God (Hosea 1:10), and David's offspring is called God's son (2 Sam. 7:14; Psa. 2:7; cf. 89:26-27). Based on the use of υιοθεσία in Greek inscriptions and the human procedure of adoption, writers such as James Scott consider that these Old Testament references, especially Exodus 4:22 and 2 Samuel 7:14, are cases of divine adoption. However, when 2 Samuel 7:14 is considered with Psalm 2:7, "You are My Son; today I have begotten You," this clearly must be viewed as a promise of divine *begetting* rather than divine *adoption*. While some consider this as a borrowing of coronation rites from other Near Eastern cultures, the New Testament writers understood this as a

reference to Christ being begotten as the firstborn Son of God in His resurrection (Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5).

In view of the above, the passages where Israel is called God's son are better considered as an indication of God's paternity in His creation (cf. Acts 17:28-29) and selection of Israel. The verses in which Israel or David's offspring are to be considered God's son (at some time future to the utterance) are best interpreted as promises of divine sonship which are fulfilled in the New Testament (Rom. 9:26; 2 Cor. 6:18; Heb. 1:5; Rev. 21:7). Thus, these Old Testament passages are best taken not as indicators of divine adoption, but rather as a reflection of God as the source of Israel in creation and a reflection of His aspiration to have many sons sharing in His life and nature. This could be fulfilled only after the incarnation of His only begotten Son, who after passing through human living and death became the firstborn Son of God in resurrection. In resurrection He, as the last Adam, became the life-giving Spirit in order to regenerate the believers and make them the many sons of God. This transpires not through a judicial procedure of adoption but through an organic process which consummates in the believers' full growth and maturity as manifested sons of God (Rom. 8:19).

An Organic Process

The fact that sonship, the making of believers into mature sons of God, is an organic process can be seen in numerous places in the New Testament. The five occurrences of υιοθεσία, when viewed together, clearly indicate that υιοθεσία refers to a process. This process begins in Ephesians 1:5 with the predestination of the believers unto sonship. In the Old Testament this sonship was the unique privilege of Israel, as is mentioned in Romans 9:4. In the New Testament sonship is received by the redeemed believers according to Galatians 4:5, and this includes the receiving of the spirit of sonship mentioned in Romans 8:15. Finally, in Romans 8:23 the believers eagerly await sonship, the consummation and maturation of the process of becoming a manifest son of God, the redemption of their body. Brendan Byrne points out the tension that exists between the present and future aspects of υιοθεσία in Romans 8 (if υιοθεσία is viewed as adoption). This can be resolved by an understanding of "a real but hidden status of υιοθεσία in the present, attested by the Spirit (vv. 15-16) and the public revelation of this status at the time when believers will share the *bodily* resurrection of the Firstborn Son of God (v. 29; cf. Phil. 3:20 1)" (293).

In addition, the vocabulary used to describe the believers is the same as that used to describe human beings in the natural process of birth, growth, and maturation in the stages of human life. At the beginning of the process the believers are referred to as newborn babes (βρέφη—1 Pet. 2:2; cf. 1 Cor. 14:20), followed by infants (νήπιοι—

1 Cor. 3:1; Heb. 5:13), children of God (τέκνα—John 1:12; Rom. 8:16-17), sons of God (υιοί—Rom. 8:14; Gal. 3:26; 4:6-7; Heb. 12:7), brothers of the firstborn Son of God (Rom. 8:29; Heb. 2:12; John 20:17), and heirs of God (Rom. 8:17; Gal. 4:7). Many verses in the New Testament indicate that God imparts His divine life into His redeemed and makes them a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15) and indeed His very children (cf. John 1:12). Human beings can be regenerated (ἀναγεννώ—1 Pet. 1:3, 23; παλιγγεννώ—Titus 3:5), born again or born from above (γεννώ ἄνωθεν—John 3:3), and born of water and the Spirit (vv. 5-6). God genuinely begets sons by a divine birth (1:13; 1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18). Believers receive the divine eternal life (ζωή—John 3:16; 1 John 5:12-13) and partake of the divine nature (φύσις—2 Pet. 1:4). They grow with the growth of God (Col. 2:19, cf. 1 Pet. 2:2; Eph. 4:15-16) unto full growth, or maturity (τέλειοι—Col. 1:28; 4:12; Heb. 5:14; 1 Cor. 14:20).

The use of υιοθεσία and the words used to describe the believers' experiences clearly indicate that sonship is an organic process rather than a judicial procedure. To convey the impression that believers become sons of God merely through a judicial procedure, as most translators imply and commentators reinforce, neglects the use of the word in the New Testament as well as God's ability not only to re-create but also to regenerate human beings with His divine life and make us His sons in life and nature.

by Roger Good

Notes

¹For example, all five verses in the Berkeley version, and in Romans 8:15 in the NIV, RSV, and Jerusalem Bible.

²The word *adopt* from the Latin *ad-opto* means "to take one by choice, taking one (in the place of a child)." In its root meaning it actually is quite close to the Greek. However, the notion that the word *adoption* conveys to the modern reader is that of a judicial procedure.

³In pre-New Testament use it occurs mostly in inscriptions dating back only as far as the second century BC. In these inscriptions it is used to refer to the judicial procedure of adoption, which is the only way humanly one could be set or put into the place of a son.

Works Cited

- Byrne, Brendan. Rev. of "Adoption as Sons of God—an Exegetical Investigation into the Background of ΥΙΟΘΕΣΙΑ in the Pauline Corpus." Ed. James M. Scott. *Journal of Theological Studies* 44 (April 1993): 288-294.
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